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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000042

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: FOREIGN NGOS IN SYRIA: SYRIAN ARAB RED CRESCENT
PRESIDENT PLEDGES SUPPORT

REF: A. 09 DAMASCUS 776

[1](#)B. 09 DAMASCUS 819

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1.(C) SUMMARY: Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) President Abdul Rahman Attar told us January 11 he is committed to supporting international NGOs operating in Syria. Addressing issues that Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration Eric Schwartz raised with Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad during his November visit to Syria (ref A), Attar also promised to look into the application of the U.S.-based NGO Center for the Victims of Torture (CVT) which is seeking approval to operate in Syria. Despite his pledges of support, international NGOs will likely continue to face significant operating challenges in Syria, where most NGOs are required to work under the SARC umbrella, and fault the SARC for its management of them. END SUMMARY.

SARC PRESIDENT STILL BASKING IN GLOW OF IFRC ELECTION VICTORY

[1](#)2. (C) SARC President Abdul Rahman Attar told us January 11 he is committed to supporting the approximately 14 international NGOs operating in Syria. The 71-year-old Attar, who is one of Syria's most prominent businessmen, was recently elected to the governing board of the International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent (IFRC). Attar expressed pride in his new position, stating he believed it was a positive step for Syria on the international stage and noting that his father began the Red Crescent's presence in Syria in 1942. Attar also said he was grateful for the support of American delegates during the IFRC's elections in Kenya in November.

INTERNATIONAL NGOS SOMETIMES STRUGGLE WITH ATTAR

[1](#)3. (C) International NGOs, including U.S.-based groups like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and International Medical Corps (IMC), have criticized the SARC for its control over almost all NGOs operating in Syria. Any NGO seeking to work here must obtain SARC permission by submitting proposed projects, sources of funding, and resource needs. The SARC normally takes a minimum of 4-6 weeks to review; unless the project has been worked out in advance, most proposals end up being rejected or delayed while NGOs answer questions and resubmit their proposals.

[1](#)4. (C) Another common complaint among international NGOs is the SARC sometimes engages in power struggles with various ministries regarding the oversight of NGOs. Some NGO country directors have attributed the SARC's actions to the ambitions of Attar. "He's a big personality, and one of the richest, most powerful men in Syria and he doesn't want to lose control over NGOs to the MFA or any other ministry," IMC Country Director Hussien Ibrahim said. NGOs blame the SARC for its imposition of strict salary caps for Syrian employees that make it difficult for NGOs to retain local staff, and its "inflexible limits" on the number of international staff NGOs can hire.

[1](#)5. (C) During his November visit to Syria, Assistant Secretary Schwartz raised the issue of NGO operating space with Vice Foreign Minister Miqdad and asked Miqdad that Syria grant visas to NGO and international

organization staff (ref B). Among other issues, Schwartz also asked Migdad to facilitate issuance of a visa for the Director of the Center for the Victims of Torture, which is seeking to operate in Syria to provide psycho-social support to Iraqi refugees.

ATTAR PLEDGES SUPPORT

¶6. (C) CDA raised the same issues with Attar, and asked him to look into CVT's application to operate in Syria. Attar assured the CDA he supports the work of international NGOs in Syria. As evidence of his support, he noted that two years ago there were only a handful of NGOs in the country and claimed that due to his support significant progress has been made since that time with approximately 14 international NGOs now supporting Iraqi refugees in Syria.

¶7. (C) Attar conceded the NGO registration process "takes too long" and added "I am really not happy with this." But the SARC president stressed his organization is working with NGOs to assist them in registering. Regarding CTV's application, Attar said it has still not been approved by Syrian government ministries; he promised to look into the matter.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Attar's election to the IFRC governing board raises his already significant stature both internationally and in Syria. He plans to attend the upcoming World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and stated he looks forward to representing the SARC and Syria on the world stage. His stature gives him the opportunity to advance the interests of international NGOs working in Syria. Despite his pledges of support, however, it is unclear whether international NGOs will see their most common complaints addressed regarding SARC management of NGOs. Post will continue to follow up with the MFA and the SARC on NGO operations in Syria. END COMMENT.

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HUNTER